Article

Xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes in the time of COVID-19

Victoria M. Esses[1] and Leah K. Hamilton[2]

Abstract
The devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nations and individuals has almost certainly led to increased feelings of threat and competition, heightened uncertainty, lack of control, and a rise in authoritarianism. In this paper we use social psychological and sociological theories to explore the anticipated effects on xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes worldwide. Based on our analysis, we discuss recommendations for further research required during the ups and downs of the pandemic, as well as during recovery. We also discuss the need for research to address how to best counteract this expected surge in xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes. As the pandemic persists, it will be important to systematically examine its effects on xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes, and to develop and implement strategies that keep these negative attitudes at bay.

Keywords
anti-immigrant attitudes, COVID-19, immigrants, immigration, pandemic, threat, xenophobia

The COVID-19 pandemic has infected over 92 million people worldwide and killed close to two million people, with no end in sight (see John Hopkins University's Coronavirus Resource Centre's website: https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html). The economic impact has also been devastating, with countries and individuals struggling with high unemployment levels and the risk of recession (The World Bank, 2020). Reactions to the pandemic have included travel restrictions, partial or complete border closures to nonresidents, and the halting of immigration and the entry of asylum seekers to most OECD countries (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2020). The long-term impact is unknown, but as the pandemic persists, health and economic concerns are palpable around the world, and countries are increasingly turning inward. In this paper we discuss the implications for the spread of xenophobic and anti-immigration attitudes, and provide some recommendations for future research in this area.

A Surge in Xenophobia and Anti-Immigrant Attitudes

Preliminary evidence suggests that the pandemic is having a deleterious effect on attitudes toward

[1]The University of Western Ontario, Canada
[2]Mount Royal University, Canada

Corresponding author:
Victoria M. Esses, Department of Psychology, The University of Western Ontario, 1151 Richmond St, London, Canada ON N6A 5C2.
Email: vesses@uwo.ca

immigrants and immigration (Newbold, 2020; Yamagata et al., 2020). As the crisis endures, social psychological and sociological theories suggest that migration-related attitudes will deteriorate further, driven by perceptions of threat and competition, heightened uncertainty, feelings of lack of control, and a rise in authoritarianism (see also Gamlen, 2020; Yale MacMillan Center, 2020).

COVID-19 has created a landscape characterized by fear, uncertainty, and a feeling of lack of control. In addition to real threats posed to people's health and to national and global economies, pandemics cause more general feelings of fear and threat (Strong, 1990). This is particularly the case when they are novel, relatively unpredicted, and have devastating consequences, all of which characterize COVID-19. In its nationally representative survey of over 14,000 adults from 14 countries in the summer of 2020, the Pew Research Center (Poushter & Huang, 2020) found that people viewed climate change and the spread of infectious diseases as the top two perceived threats to their nations, with a majority also viewing terrorism, cyberattacks, nuclear weapons, and the condition of the global economy as threats. Though these threats are not specific to immigrants and immigration, and some authors have thus suggested that immigration attitudes will not be affected (Dennison & Geddes, 2020), the generalized feeling of threat is a strong predictor of xenophobia (Clissold et al., 2020) and prejudice toward immigrants (Murray & Marx, 2013).

Feelings of lack of control have also been found to be associated with prejudice toward immigrants, either on their own (Harrell et al., 2017) or as a moderator of threat perceptions (Greenaway et al., 2013). What is particularly striking about these findings is that perceived lack of control does not have to be related to the issue at hand—immigration—to influence attitudes toward immigrants. Instead, generalized feelings of lack of control, or feelings of lack of control over specific threats to one's nation unrelated to immigration, are sufficient to elicit negative immigration attitudes. In this context, and as the current pandemic endures with no specific end in sight, negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration are likely to dominate in many nations.

Evolutionary psychologists have examined how prejudice can stem from disease avoidance and its associated psychological mechanisms that foster xenophobia (Navarrete & Fessler, 2006). Evidence suggests that self-reported disease vulnerability and activation of disease concerns (health threats) cause people to become less supportive of unfamiliar immigrant groups (Faulkner et al., 2004). This has borne out during the COVID-19 pandemic; Yamagata et al. (2020) found that, as the spread of COVID-19 increased in Japan, Japanese citizens reported higher tendencies toward infection-prevention behaviors, and greater exclusionary attitudes toward foreigners. Relatedly, individuals with higher pathogen-disgust sensitivity (i.e., people who report more disgust and anxiety toward potential pathogens, like people coughing) are less likely to support entry of both immigrants from an unspecified origin and immigrants from a nation associated with infectious disease (Ji et al., 2019), which is surely influencing attitudes toward immigrants and immigration in this time of COVID-19 vigilance. Indeed, recent evidence indicates that disgust mediates the relation between threat of contamination and avoidance/rejection of a group (Aubé & Ric, 2019).

Importantly, these theorists (e.g., Navarrete & Fessler, 2006) are quick to point out that experience and social learning also play a role in the creation of the psychological mechanisms that signal disease threat. In the case of COVID-19, there are substantial racial and ethnic inequities in relation to COVID-19 morbidity, hospitalization rates, and mortality rates in the United States (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). For instance, compared to Whites, Hispanic or Latino persons (of whom many are first- or second-generation immigrants) are 2.8 times more likely to be infected and 4.6 times more likely to be hospitalized due to COVID-19 (see also Marshburn et al., 2021, for a detailed discussion of racial bias and inequality during COVID-19). In Canada, immigrants and refugees represented 44% of Ontario's COVID-19 cases in the first half of 2020, despite representing only about 25% of the population

(Guttmann et al., 2020). While these disparities are to some extent driven by structural racism, they also have the potential to perpetuate individual-level racism and xenophobia by fueling activation of disease concerns (see Grant & Smith, 2021, for a discussion of group-based collective action in response to these disparities). If the media and politicians portray ethnic minorities, immigrants, and refugees as vectors of COVID-19, this will lead to dehumanization and support for restrictive immigration policies (Esses et al., 2013). For example, President Donald Trump has repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the "kung flu" and "Chinese virus" (Scott, 2020), while the Riley County Commission chairperson stated that "it's not as big a problem here as elsewhere because there aren't many Chinese people" (Dixon, 2020). Similarly, U.S. Senator John Cornyn claimed that the Chinese are to blame for the coronavirus because of "the culture where people eat bats and snakes and dogs and things like that" (Shepherd, 2020). These politicians have all spoken of Chinese people in disparaging ways while associating them with a threat to Americans' health, thus fanning the flames of xenophobia and exclusion.

Over and above specific disease-related concerns, COVID-19 has made salient several other types of threat that may increase xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment. Research on the study of threat in the context of immigration (e.g., Canetti et al., 2016; Esses et al., 2002) has shown that negative attitudes toward immigrants can develop when situational factors (e.g., an economic recession) and ideologies (e.g., a rise in authoritarianism) combine to create perceptions of group competition. In the case of COVID-19, perceived competition may be rooted in real or perceived global and national economic challenges, and zero-sum beliefs about access to employment opportunities, unemployment insurance, and the like. Moreover, COVID-19 may heighten perceived symbolic (cultural) forms of threat and competition, such as believing that different religious/cultural practices (e.g., attending in-person religious services) are sources of COVID-19 transmission. The stereotype content model suggests that perceptions of competition will have important implications for how immigrants are viewed, with perceived competition leading to attributions of low warmth to immigrants (Caprariello et al., 2009). If immigrants are seen as a competitive threat and also competent, they will elicit envious prejudice; if they are seen as a competitive threat and low in competence, they will elicit contemptuous prejudice and dehumanization, which may serve as a justification for their exclusion and mistreatment (Esses et al., 2013).

Authoritarianism is also likely to be increasing during the pandemic, as individuals face personal and national threats to their well-being, and seek clear answers (Yale MacMillan Center, 2020). Extant evidence suggests that perceived threats to the social order activate preexisting tendencies towards authoritarianism (e.g., Asbrock & Fritsche, 2013), and that uncertainty about the self leads to support for more authoritarian leadership (Hogg & Adelman, 2013), which has been shown to predict anti-immigrant attitudes (Cohrs & Stelzl, 2010). Authoritarianism may also exacerbate the effects of threat, with recent research conducted in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland finding that during the first week of the lockdown, right-wing authoritarianism and threat perceptions together predicted especially negative immigration attitudes (Hartman et al., 2020). Authoritarian leaders seem to understand this relation, and there have been a number of reports of far-right leaders in Europe taking advantage of the anxiety elicited by COVID-19 to attempt to solidify anti-immigration attitudes by blaming immigrants for the spread of the disease (Hume, 2020; Reidy, 2020). Similarly, in the US, Trump's administration has set the lowest limit ever on refugee admissions for 2021, citing the need to protect the safety and well-being of Americans during the pandemic (Kanno-Youngs & Shear, 2020).

Recommendations for Future Research on Xenophobia and Immigration Attitudes

What our analysis suggests is that the plethora of perceptions of threat and competition, heightened uncertainty, feelings of lack of control, and

a rise in authoritarianism driven by the pandemic together will lead to a surge in xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes across the world. Teasing apart the individual effects of each hypothesized driver of negative attitudes will be challenging given their likely additive, interactive, and mutually reinforcing effects at a time when all may be heightened. This will require a variety of research approaches, including longitudinal work examining changes in each factor and resultant attitudes over time, experiments in which each proposed factor is primed or manipulated independently, and sophisticated data analytic strategies that can handle the potentially mutually reinforcing effects of the identified factors and attitudes. Longitudinal work would do well to focus not only on the impact of the pandemic on the daily lives of individuals (e.g., during lockdowns vs. more open phases of the pandemic), but should also cover the postpandemic recovery period so that the impact of the rise and fall of factors promoting negative attitudes toward immigrants can be tracked.

Given that different nations have been differentially influenced by the pandemic and have responded to it in varying ways—in terms of lockdowns, provision of financial assistance, and national discourse about cause and responsibility—cross-national studies will also be particularly valuable in teasing apart the factors that may be influencing xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes. It will also be important to examine xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes from a variety of vantage points, including by centering the experiences and perspectives of immigrants themselves. For instance, there will be value in examining how immigrants' perceptions of belonging and experiences of racism change as nations respond to the pandemic, and as xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes rise and fall.

At a more specific level of analysis, several important and timely research questions present themselves. Although the association of immigrants with disease has a long history, there is a paucity of recent research on this potential form of threat and its direct or indirect impact on attitudes toward immigrants (cf. Esses et al., 2013;

Faulkner et al., 2004). Such research will surely come to the fore now that the pandemic has had such a significant global impact. This research may focus on the effect of this health threat per se, irrespective of its association with immigrants, or may specifically focus on the effects of perceived health threats from immigrants. In addition, the pandemic has elicited a mix of negative and positive emotional reactions (Smillie et al., 2020), from fear and sadness to contentment and joy, and their individual and combined impact on xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes would also be of interest. Indeed, the role of emotions in mediating effects on these attitudes has been generally understudied.

It is also the case that, although attitudes toward immigrants and immigration levels are often highly correlated, at times, factors have been found to have a larger impact on one than the other (Esses et al., 2019). In the current context, it would therefore be beneficial to examine the effects of perceptions of threat and competition, heightened uncertainty, feelings of lack of control, and a rise in authoritarianism driven by the pandemic on attitudes toward immigrants, immigration levels, and immigration policies. Indeed, many countries have closed their borders to nonresidents in response to the pandemic, with considerable support from their citizens (e.g., in Canada, 90% of citizens supported closing the border with the US; Canseco, 2020), but this does not in itself tell us whether attitudes toward immigrants, outside or inside the country, have been affected.

Finally, we would be remiss not to discuss the pressing need to consider how to best counteract potential xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes resulting from the pandemic. Gaucher et al. (2018) found that the beliefs and values espoused by the government in power (i.e., system-sanctioned ideologies) impact perceptions of migrants (particularly for individuals who are motivated to justify their sociopolitical system). Thus, it would be useful to examine whether a potential rise in anti-immigrant attitudes can be prevented if politicians (and the media more broadly) emphasize the importance of immigrants to their nation's

response to the pandemic, both in the immediate and long term. For instance, if politicians highlight the essential role that immigrants have played in the response to COVID-19 through their work as personal support workers (PSWs) in long-term care facilities and as employees in the agricultural sector and food-processing plants that are vital to the supply chain, does this counteract anti-immigrant attitudes that may be provoked by the pandemic? As global and national economies contract, it would also be useful to determine the impact of political discourse focusing on the long-term economic and social benefits of maintaining (or increasing) current immigration levels, in contrast to short-term perspectives that may induce additional perceptions of competition and threat.

In addition, evidence suggests that reporting accurate information regarding the share and characteristics of immigrants in a nation leads to more positive attitudes and behaviors toward them, particularly for individuals with more negative initial attitudes (Grigorieff et al., 2020). It will be useful to test how such information is perceived, processed, and its impact during current conditions characterized by high generalized feelings of threat and lack of control. Importantly, research examining the impact of health officials reporting on racial inequities related to COVID-19 morbidity should determine how this information can be framed without triggering disease concerns that fuel anti-immigrant attitudes. We predict that, in part, this can be achieved by providing accurate information about why COVID-19 rates are higher for racialized groups, such as highlighting structural inequities that put racialized groups at risk (e.g., higher likelihood of precarious employment in occupations where physical distancing is impossible).

Finally, while intergroup contact under appropriate conditions has been touted as an effective strategy for combatting prejudice, face-to-face contact between groups has been reduced during the pandemic due to border closures, travel bans, temporary halts on immigration and the entry of asylum seekers, and social distancing measures. As a result, future researchers may wish to examine the effects of virtual intergroup contact during the pandemic on reducing xenophobia and negative attitudes toward immigrants (Dovidio et al., 2017).

Although the long-term effects of COVID-19 on xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes are unknown, preliminary evidence from several nations suggests that the pandemic has already had a negative impact on attitudes toward immigrants and immigration (Newbold, 2020; Yamagata et al., 2020). Social psychological and sociological theories suggest these attitudes will further deteriorate, yet these bodies of evidence also offer important insights into how to prevent and counteract these negative attitudes. As the pandemic persists, it will be important to systematically examine its effects on xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes, and to develop and implement strategies that keep these attitudes at bay.

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ORCID iD

Victoria M. Esses https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8002-2725

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